Debunking the Bat Masterson Myth

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One of the most interesting Fairbury history tales is the one about Bat Masterson working in the Fairbury coal mines. Bat Masterson is most famous for being a gunfighter and sheriff in Dodge City, Kansas.

An exhaustive study was done to determine how this story first got started. It all traces back to a March 27, 1952 article in the Blade. This article was titled ***Roots of Fairbury Buried Deeply in Coal Mines***. The reporter that wrote this article reported that a Fairbury coal miner had told Mr. R. A. McAllister that Bat Masterson worked briefly in the Marsh coal mine. The reporter also said that Mr. McAllister was the primary source for the coal mining information in the article.

Upon his death in 1967, the Blade reported that Richard A. McAllister was a colorful and sometimes controversial figure in Fairbury history. As a young man, McAllister worked in the Fairbury coal mines. He was a physically big man and played professional football before any formal leagues existed. Later in life, he was an Alderman and was the Postmaster of Fairbury.

In 1958, a new television show debuted called ***Bat Masterson***. It was an American Western television series which showed a fictionalized account of the life of real-life marshal/gambler/dandy Bat Masterson. The title character was played by Gene Barry and the half-hour black-and-white shows ran on NBC from 1958 to 1961. The series was produced by Ziv Television Productions.

In 1962, the popularity of the television show prompted the Blade to publish a story about Bat Masterson working in the Fairbury coal mines. The story was titled ***Is it Legend? Rumor Reports that Bat Masterson Once Worked in Marsh Coal Mines***. This Blade story quoted R. A. McAllister again, "I never actually saw him, but the word is that he worked at the Marsh Mines west of town." This story said that around 1902, Bat was forced to leave Denver. The Blade reporter speculated that maybe Bat stopped at Fairbury on his way from Denver to New York.

In March of 1976, the Pontiac Daily Leader did a series of historical stories about local towns in honor of the nation's bicentennial. For Fairbury history, they published a photograph of a group of coal miners and the above-ground mine building. The photo caption was, "Bat Masterson, center rear of the photo, worked for Marsh in the mine for several years before he went to Dodge City and became a famous United States Marshall. He was remembered because, unlike the other miners, he was always well dressed and quiet mannered."

The man purported to be Bat Masterson in the photo is an older adult man. The quality of the photograph is not good enough to verify it is Bat Masterson. No source is given for the picture or the information about Bat Masterson. It is likely the information was provided by Alma Lewis James.

In 1977, Alma Lewis James released the second edition of her book, ***Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars***. In this edition, she added the story that Bat Masterson worked in the Fairbury coal mines. She used the exact same wording as was used in the 1976 Leader photograph caption.

Around this time, someone had postcards printed showing the same photograph as the 1976 Leader story. The postcard had the exact same wording as the Leader mining photograph.

Lee Garber was a native of Fairbury who went on to become a University Professor. In 1982, the Pantagraph ran an article about his retirement. In this article, Garber said he was researching the issue of whether Bat Masteron really worked in the Fairbury coal mines.

In his 1986 Blade editorial column, Jim Roberts noted that Lee Garber was unable to substantiate that Bat Masterson worked in the Fairbury coal mines. Lee Garber spent four years researching this question before he died in 1986.

In 2014, after years of research, Robert K. DeArment published his book ***Bat Masterson: The Man and the Legend***. At the beginning of his book, DeArment notes that almost everything published about Bat Masterson in the 1870s and 1880s was incorrect. East Coast newspaper reporters embellished their stories to try to satisfy the insatiable public appetite for wild west stories. Many stories were published that Bat was born in Illinois.

DeArment found that Bat Masterson was actually born on November 26, 1853, in Quebec, Canada. His baptismal record is still on file at St. George parish.

In 1861, the Masterson family started a ten-year trek from Canada to Sedgwick County, Kansas. Very little is known about the various stops the family made on this journey.

In 1871, Bat's father bought farmland in Sedgwick County. His father lived on this farm until he died in 1921. In 1871, Bat was eighteen years old. He and his brother Ed left the family home and decided to become buffalo hunters.

After several years of buffalo hunting, Bat was appointed Deputy Sheriff for Ford County by Sheriff Charlie Bassett. On November 6, 1877, twenty days before his twenty-fourth birthday, Bat Masterson ran and was elected Sheriff of Ford County.

During the next ten years, Bat served as a lawman in various locations. Extensive newspaper reporting of his adventures made him nationally famous.

Bat became interested in heavyweight boxing in the late 1880s. Author DeArment noted that from the year 1889 until the day of his death, there was scarcely a major heavyweight prizefight in the United States that Bat Masterson did not witness. During the 1890s, his role was frequently more than that of a mere spectator, however; he was often directly involved in the promotions. In 1889, he served as a special bodyguard to Jake Kilrain and Charlie Mitchell when Kilrain arrived in New Orleans to meet John L. Sullivan for the title.

On April 18, 1899, the Olympic Athletic Club was founded, W. B. Masterson, President. Bat leased the Haymarket Theater, formerly the Academy of Music, an old building on the corner of Sixteenth and Market streets, and called in architects to begin alterations. “I expect to get the best men in the ring in Denver,” he was quoted in the Republican.

Bat moved to New York City in 1902 and spent the rest of his life there as a reporter and columnist for the New York Morning Telegraph. Masterson's newspaper column not only covered boxing and other sports, but frequently gave his opinions on crime, war, politics, and other topics as well. He became a close friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. Bat died while working at his reporting desk in 1921.

If Bat Masterson worked at a Fairbury coal mine before he started his buffalo hunting and lawman career, he would have been between eight and eighteen years of age. This does not match the mining photograph, which shows an older adult male. It also does not match the description of Bat Masterson given in the caption of the mining photograph.

It is also very doubtful that Bat Masterson stopped in Fairbury when he moved from Denver to New York in 1902. At that time, Bat was nationally famous as a lawman. He was also very well known as a promoter of heavyweight boxing matches. He was so renowned that a New York newspaper gave him a job as a sports columnist. Bat did not need to take a coal mining job in Fairbury.

There was a Masterson family that lived in Fairbury. A genealogical review found there was no connection between this family and Bat Masterson's family.

Based on the facts, it is highly improbable that Bat Masterson actually worked in a Fairbury coal mine.